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Author(s): Aino Malmberg

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THE POLITICAL SITUATION OF FINLAND

By Aino Malmberg, Helsingfors, Finland

When Finland came under Russian rule in 1809, Tsar Alexander I solemnly confirmed and ratified the fundamental laws and rights of the Grand Duchy, which it had enjoyed under the Swedish kings, and granted a constitution to Finland. That was the beginning of the life of a self-conscious Finnish nation.

Up to 1899 we were left to mind our own business without much interference from the Russian government. The results were wonderfully good, as I shall try to show later on, and the whole period forms a curiously clear object lesson to the great powers which are so ready to "protect" small nations on the ground that they are not "fit to govern themselves."

In 1809 Finland was a very sparsely populated and extremely poor country. Six sevenths of the population spoke an uncultured language with no literature save some miserably translated religious works. The ruling class spoke Swedish, education was obtainable only in Swedish, and that was also the only official language. Considering how very unpromising was such a beginning, the state of development in 1899 seems almost a miracle.

Finland of 1899 was a prosperous country with a very highly developed educational system, a Diet of its own, its own monetary and fiscal arrangements, a Finnish army, etc. In civilization it stood on the same level as the Scandinavian countries, in some respects even higher. The Finnish language was cultured and we had writers both in Finnish and in Swedish of whom we were justly proud. Finnish art and Finnish music showed a distinctly original character and had won a good name in Europe.

But, of course, the medal had another side also. All the drawbacks of a quiet, happy life in petty circumstances

were clearly visible in Finland. We managed our affairs so well that we could easily do without the world outside. As there is no life without strife it was but natural that we should have our struggles also. Even in that respect fate had been benevolent to Finland providing it with two nationalities and two languages, Finnish and Swedish, which quite naturally began a fierce fight for supremacy. Thus we had no need for "movements" from the big countries, and could spend our surplus energy on our own dear language quarrel. Being a highly civilized nation we also felt the longing to suppress people weaker than ourselves, and to let them feel our superiority. Happily enough we had a handful of poor Jews, immigrated from Russia, and we tried our best to make life a burden to them. Thus Finland could boast of being a good miniature picture of the great European nations, bearers of civilization and progress.

As to our relations to Russia, they were those of perfect, naïve, sentimental loyalty. Tsar Alexander III who never dared to show himself openly to his own people, traveled safely every summer in Finland, and was received there with flowers, and songs, and enthusiastic ovations.

As for the fight for freedom in which our unhappy Russian brothers and sisters were engaged, Finland had no sympathy to give. We felt comfortable, so why should we bother?

The air indeed had become rather stale and wanted ventilation.

The ventilation came, but in the form of a violent tempest that threatened to devastate little Finland.

On February 15, 1899, Tsar Nicholas II issued a manifesto which completely violated the constitution of Finland, most solemnly ratified and sworn by his gracious self some years earlier. The manifesto proposed to remove from the Finnish Senate and Diet the legislative power of dealing with any question in which Russian interests of any kind might be implicated. And very soon it was clear that this meant all questions whatever!

The blow was absolutely unexpected and the effect of it was stupefying. The Finns with all their weaknesses and all their civilization are passionately attached to their

country. I do not mention this as some sort of proof of high development. On the contrary, I am told that for instance the Esquimaux love their cold country intensely, and I know that the Laplanders do. It seems to be a trick of Nature to bind us northern people to our poor soil with bands that we never can break without tearing our hearts too.

When it became known what had happened everyone seemed to feel it as a personal sorrow. I have heard many comments upon and much laughing at the fact that Finnish women dressed in mourning. Well, I understand that it must have seemed to an outsider both sentimental and affected, but certainly it was natural at that time. We were sentimental, and we were naïve. There was no mutual agreement, but it was natural to everybody personally to dress in black. Sorrow had come to Finland.

The first act of the Finnish nation was also utterly childish: it was decided to send an address to the Tsar! The good Tsar, the righteous one who loved us, his poor, loyal subjects, and who had sworn to keep our laws, *he* could not know what had happened. Certainly he would hasten to help us as soon as he knew.

A deputation was sent to St. Petersburg carrying an address signed by more than 500,000 Finns.

The deputation was not received, neither was the address.

It began to dawn upon us that perhaps all our tear-dropping loyalty had been spent in vain. The fact became still clearer when some months later a similar address bearing the most eminent names from all Europe was brought to the Tsar with exactly the same results.

Now began a time of suffering for Finland. A new Governor General—Bobrikoff—had been sent to our country. He was one of those typical Russian brutes whom the Tsar sends to “pacify” his vast empire. The “pacifying” of a perfectly peaceful country like Finland must have been a hard task indeed for a Russian official who wanted to win glory and reputation from Nicholas II. But Bobrikoff was the right man, and he was determined to do his best.

The energy with which he applied the usual Russian methods was marvellous. Domiciliary searches were arranged all over the country, absolutely peaceful citizens, many of whom had never had anything whatever to do with politics, were seized, sent into exile, or placed in Russian prison dens. Newspapers were suppressed, the Finnish army was dispersed, loyal officials were dismissed, meetings prohibited, schools interfered with.

It would require too much space to give a full account of the area of Bobrikoff's activity. "Stolypin's necktie" was not yet invented, but I think that was the only one of the Russian blessings not introduced into Finland.

The Finns resisted all temptations and the only form of resistance was a passive one.

But it was a wonderful time of awakening and development.

As a natural consequence of the suppression of newspapers, secret literature began to flourish and had an immense influence. The Russian fight for freedom had begun afresh, and now it was followed with the keenest interest in Finland, because at last we had begun to understand that freedom in Russia also meant freedom in Finland, and so long as autocracy was alive, we had no hope. We had learnt how much imperial words and promises meant in real life.

As time went on the state of things grew worse. In 1904 we had reached a stage of complete autocracy. Then something happened that always happens when all civilized means show themselves ineffective to check criminal tyranny. The Governor General Bobrikoff was shot by a young Finn, Eugene Schauman. Those who understand the story of William Tell understand also what Eugene Schauman's deed meant to Finland.

Times now began to change for the better. The new Governor General, Prince Obolensky, had certainly not a better reputation than Bobrikoff—among other merits he could boast of having had several peasants flogged to death when he was Governor General in Harkoff—but he was more of a coward and dared not display too great an energy in his methods of suppression. Then the Japanese war was

growing more and more disastrous for Russia, and in Russia itself the movement for freedom was developing. It became clear that a change was coming, but what it was we could not quite understand.

The movement in Russia had grown into open revolution and the wave of freedom was sweeping from east to west.

Then something happened in Finland which stands quite alone in the history of mankind. I mean the Great National Strike, as it is usually called for fear of the word Revolution.

It was the end of October in 1905. Rumors of the Russian revolution seemed to come nearer and nearer, and the excitement grew almost unendurable. What did we expect? Nobody knew.

A railway strike had begun in Russia and was spreading westward. Soon it touched Finland and the next stage was that Finland took part in it. But that was only the beginning. On the last day of October the whole Finnish nation struck.

On the very same day all expressions of social activity came to a dead standstill throughout Finland. We had no schools, no banks, no trains, no factories, no trams, no gas, no post—nothing. Everyone of us, men and women, adults and children refused to do anything for a whole week.

I do not even try to explain how it was possible, because it cannot be explained. Now, afterward, even we who were in the midst of it can hardly understand it. An amiable Puck had touched us making us dream of the Millenium, where all people knew each other and were friends, and where there were no different classes and no hostile races.

It really was so during that week of dreams and deep emotions. In Helsingfors where I happened to be, there are Finnish, Swedish, and Russian Schools, in which the children had always been more or less hostile to each other. Now they walked in long processions together singing the Marseillaise. The grown up people behaved in the same way. Strangers spoke to each other in the streets as if they were old friends, and everybody seemed suddenly to have

acquired a deep human understanding of the minds of each other.

There was no leader and no organizer of the strike, but somehow everybody seemed to know that now the right moment had come for the final struggle. Or perhaps "struggle" is not the right expression for a state of things when everyone abstained from an struggle.

A deputation went from Helsingfors to St. Petersburg to express the wishes of Finland to the Tsar. Everything we wanted was granted at once. It has never been very difficult to get promises from Nicholas II!

The old laws were restored, general adult suffrage was introduced and the Diet was hereafter to consist of one Chamber only instead of four Estates as before. Thus every man and woman of twenty-four years of age had now the right to vote and to be elected to the Diet. The number of deputies was to be two hundred.

It was all, and even more than we could expect. But there was from the very beginning a curious sense of uncertainty, and every one who was not childishly sanguine understood that this was only a truce and not a peace.

This was very soon proved.

In Russia repression began a week after their liberties had been granted, in Finland the truce lasted a little longer. Up to June, 1908, Finland was troubled but little. Those three years show a time of incessant work and progress in all departments of social and political life, and it may be said without exaggeration that they meant more for the political education of Finland than the thirty years of peace before 1899.

A new force of which we knew little before 1905 had come to the surface and put its mark upon the future development—the growing power of Socialism. The sufferings of Bobrikoff's times, had of course had a radicalizing effect upon all political parties, but none of us had an idea of how much they had helped the growth of Socialism, not even the Socialists themselves. As an example I may mention that a week before the first general election to our Diet in 1907 I asked one of the most prominent members of the

Social Democratic Party how many Socialists he expected to be elected. "Oh," he said, "I should think we can safely count upon forty members."

They got eighty.

Today the number of Socialists is eighty-seven out of two hundred.

The Diet began its work with vigor and enthusiasm, but upon one pretext or another the Tsar dissolved it time after time. So instead of having a Diet elected for three years we had three elections in one year.

In the first Diet we had nineteen woman deputies and their number has not varied very much since. Once they were as many as twenty-six and once only seventeen. Now they are again nineteen.

Reaction began to hamper progress more and more. At first the Russian Government tried to give their actions a certain legal color, but that was of course inconvenient in the long run. In 1908 the first brutal breaking of our Constitution took place when the Tsar issued a manifesto stating that every question or proposal with regard to Finland must come before the Russian Council of Ministers, and not as formerly, before the Secretary of State for Finland. Last year the Tsar decided that Finnish matters, involving Imperial interests, were to be decided by the Russian Government and in spite of the strong protests of the Cadets and the Labor members, the reactionary Duma passed this bill.

According to Russian interpretation there seem to be no matters at all which do not involve Imperial interests. Educational institutions, the press, taxes, the fiscal system, banks, the post, the administration of justice, etc., all have come under the same heading.

When the Duma gave its sanction to this shameless violation of the Finnish Constitution the notorious member of the Black Hundreds, Purishkevitch, exclaimed triumphantly "Finis Finlandiæ!" There is no doubt that he expressed the secret wish of Stolypin and his hirelings.

The Finnish Diet protested against the measure, and was dissolved. Now it is re-elected and will certainly be dissolved again after a short time. The Tsar seems to like the

farce of electing and dissolving—why, it is difficult to guess. Perhaps the comedy is meant to tire the Finns and to make them more pliable or—more likely—to deceive Europe as to Russia's real intentions.

In Finland as in the rest of Europe we often hear discussions on the question: *Why* does Russia want to crush Finland? The answers are generally of two kinds.

Those who pretend to possess a deep knowledge of the diplomatic secrets explain that Russia cannot suffer a "foreign" country some miles outside St. Petersburg. Finland must be Russified, because the honor and the safety of Russia require it. Besides, sooner or later Russia must find its way to an Atlantic harbor. The vast country with its enormous natural riches cannot be bottled up as it is at present—and the way to the Atlantic leads over Finland.

To this we Finns answer with another question: Is it really safer and more in conformity with Russian "honor" to have a hostile country outside St. Petersburg, than to have a loyal one? And is the way to the Atlantic easier through a hostile Finland than through a loyal Finland?

Well, but if Finland becomes Russified?

What does that "Russifying" mean?—Of course it means, not only the supremacy of the Russian language in Finland, but, principally, the bringing down of Finland to the Russian level.

I think an English writer Mr. MacCallum Scott, M. P., has hit the truth when he writes: "There is but one sure way of Russifying Finland, and that is by exterminating every Finn."

There are thousands of questions in which we Finns disagree and on which our different parties fight and quarrel, but there is one question in which there is only *one* party in Finland; the question of our Constitution and our Nationality. The talk of Russifying a country that stands higher in social and political development than Russia, is nonsense. The only thing Russia can do is to bring our finances and our legislation into disorder, and to create deep hatred in a nation that does not easily forget. There seems little doubt

that this is what the present Russian government intends to do.

The second answer we hear as an explanation of Russian politics in Finland, is this: Finland is a bad example. The Russian fighters for freedom have for years and years been pointing at Finland as a proof of what freedom and good legislation can do even in a poor and sparsely populated country. Why not give the same rights to other parts of the Empire?

This explanation seems more credible. It must, of course, be irritating for the reactionaries to hear that constant talk about the order, prosperity, and happiness that freedom has created in Finland, and the only way of silencing the inconvenient disturbers of public peace is to destroy the source of their argument

“And what are the Finns going to do?” is the question we are asked every day.

I do not think we are going to do anything, but our passive resistance will be stronger than ever. We are not so depressed in spirit to-day as we were in 1899, because now it is perfectly clear to everybody that this state of things cannot last much longer. The Russian system is too rotten already, and the sufferings of the Russian people too horrible to be endured forever. The day is nearing rapidly when the Russian nation will shake away the terrible burden under which it is sighing at the present time, and then there is no doubt that Finland will know the moment when it also must demand the restoration of its ancient law and order.